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Charging the Hero

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Arc 4: Investigation

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Investigation (1)

There was something I learned by the time the meeting was over.

There were more unknowns in this case than I had first anticipated.

When Claudia should have headed to the scene on the 10th, why were the security camera footages swapped to make her appear on the 11th?

Who delivered the letter to Claudia's house?

Why was the victim chosen in the first place?

What was the holy sword supposed to be to begin with?

And more than anything, what irritated me most was... the demon lord.

He was supposed to have come to an end fifty years ago, in a world war this country didn't even take part in, so what relation did he have to a brutal present-day murder case?

And there was one more unknown... the hero.

For some reason, the demon lord and hero were involved in this case. Both sides were major players in the Great War. They definitely did once exist in the world, and were true flesh and blood. But both of them were somewhat shady.

By the time I noticed it, it was already passed noon, and the sun was beginning to make its way downwards. Even when there wasn't a cloud in the sky when I entered the detention center, now large black rainclouds were making their way to cover the sun.

... It would be best I hurried.

I broke into a jog as I made for the station. If I used a taxi, it wouldn't take much time at all, but thinking of what was to come, it was best I economized as best I could.

Demon lord and hero, demon lord and hero, demon lord and hero...

They were already dead, the both of them. The dead don't come back. Humans gone from the living could never lay hands on the world.

Yet why were the living so insistent to cling to the deceased? They should just forget about them already.

Time-wise, perhaps it took around thirty minutes? I arrived at the station-front.

The rainclouds had completely covered the sky, and the moment I reached, a light downpour began to fall.

A step ahead of being soaked by the rain, I reached my destination building. Approachign the entrance, the sensor reacted, and automatically opened the door.

‘Welcome. You have reached dispatchable soldier corp DSC.’

As the door shut behind me, a mechanical voice flowed in out of nowhere.

Yet the building was quiet. There were few human traces, the floor tiled of black and white marble well-polished, with a majestic air drifting about.

... I felt I had gotten the wrong place. As the thought crossed my mind, a voice called over.

“Welcome to DSC. Do you have an appointment?

Looking around, I found a woman in her twenties. With a rugged title like dispatchable soldier corp, I had imagined a scarier person to come out, but the person standing before my eyes was a meek woman eternally unsuited to a shady atmosphere, as she politely gave her greetings.

“Um, no, the truth is today would be my first time using your services. I would like to hire a soldier...”

“So you’re a first-time customer.”

The woman gave a soft business smile. “Then let me explain our company’s system. Please come over here,” she said, leading me to the white counter.

Wearing what was likely the company’s uniform-a gray vest and skirt over a white dress-shirt- she said, “Please sit here,” as she urged me towards a counter seat.

“Our firm is a private soldier dispatch company. Warriors, knights, magicians,

body guards, rescue squads, hunters, we possess excellent soldiers who can fulfill all sorts of missions.”

“Um, if possible, I’m searching for someone strong... who would be the strongest?”

“A strong soldier? If you don’t mind me saying, sir. Our firm employs experts of every genre. Warriors skilled in combat, hunters specializing in monster hunting, guards who will protect you from all sorts of danger. Based on what sort of strength you are looking for, the appropriate soldier will differ.”

“Ah, I see.

I ended up agreeing.

Dispatchable Soldier Corp. I’d know its name for a while now, but this would be my first time using it.

It was hard to say the world was always safe. Grimbeld was a country with comparatively high public safety, but if you took a step out you’d find extraterritoriality. There, what protected everything wasn’t the law, but overwhelming power.

This alone, no matter how many ideals you spoke of, would never lead to anything. Since I was doing something dangerous, I couldn’t help but require adequate power.

There was a mountain of things I had to investigate to solve this case.

The crime scene, the camera’s footage, the victim... and the Dark Forest.

If I were only investigating within Grimbeld, I wouldn’t have to worry so much for my safety.

But the Dark Forest was different. That was the most dangerous no-man’s land in the world.

It wasn’t the sort of place a single lawyer could leave unscathed. In order to investigate it, I needed the support of someone powerful.

“Truth be told, I’m going to be travelling abroad for work-related purposes.”

I tried explaining my circumstance in a nutshell.

“I’ll be making a business trip to a bit of a dangerous place, so I’m searching for someone who could act as a guard on site.”

“Understood.”

The female staff made her business smile, placing an A4-size slim touch panel display on the counter.

Touching the display with her slender index finger, the dark screen suddenly lit up.

After the company’s logo popped up, a muscular, stern-looking man appeared on the screen.

“He is our company’s new guard we have high hopes for. Before signing a contract with our firm, he spent five years as a mercenary on the front lines of a conflict zone. He’s a specialist of weapons and combat, and will eliminate any sorts of danger for his client. He’s the best sort of person to accompany you overseas. Also owing to his long career in foreign lands, he is well versed in a number of languages.”

“Hmm, how reliable.”

I looked at his history, a little excitedly. But seeing the item on the very bottom, meaning his contract fee of a 20000 gold hourly wage, I turned despondent.

... His salary is higher than mine... I can’t hire him.

“U-um, I’d like to browse a few more options...”

“Certainly. By the way, do you have any requests?”

“Yes, theirs is a limit on my budget, so if possible, someone with a lower hourly fee.”

For a moment, I felt her business smile twitch, but she immediately returned to her original gentle face.

“Understood. Then let’s see, how about this one? A female magician, Radya. She’s a user of the ancient dark magic Hades, and if it’s within a one kilometer radius of her, she can completely erase any lifeform in five seconds.”

... I get the feeling she’s even more amazing than the previous person, I

thought as I looked at witch Radya's overly-exposed, voluptuous chest.

"Um, I do understand that she's amazing, but isn't she expensive as well."

"As expected of our esteemed customer. You've good eyes."

I got the feeling I was subtly stirring her up. It was a bit of a nice feel.

"Female magician Radya's contract fee would originally be 30000G per hour, but if it's now, I'll give you a special discount of a whole 15000G."

She said it frightfully cheerful, but I didn't let the small print at the very bottom of the display slip by.

※ Magician Radya's special package includes a two-year plan.

... I ain't hiring her for two years.

By the way, cancelling the contract part-way through would cost 1000000G, or so was written.

I recalled my account's balance, and reaffirmed that the world ran on money after all.

Investigation (2)

As if to press me for an answer, the female staff deployed her sales talk.

“Azure dragon knight Nicholai, if it’s now, I’ll make his hourly fee 12000G!”

“T-that’s a bit high.”

My cold sweat wouldn’t stop.

“Then the seasoned veteran knight Reus. Normally, his hourly wage would be 20000G, but this time, we’re offering a daily fee of fifty thousand gold. If he’s on service all twenty four hours of the day, it’s a discount of approximately 2000 per hour.”

“H-hold it. This man’s sixty seven, right? Can he fight?”

“Customer. It isn’t just a matter of young is better. At times, it’s important to learn from the wise, right?”

To make sure not to touch the display, I kept my finger a little away as I pointed something out.

“No, I’m sure he has plenty to teach, but it says right here he’s prone to dementia. I can’t learn anything if he’s forgotten it.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“That’s the only way to put it!”

Clearing my throat, and taking a deep breath, the dispatchable soldier corporation employee swiped the screen with her fingertip, quickly introducing the next person.

“You sure are stubborn. But there’s no helping it. I’ll introduce you a special one we keep in reserve. A short-lived master fencer, Gustav. When faced with his expert swordsmanship, any monster will be bisected in the spot, and the moment he pulls his blade from its scabbard, everything in the area shall be minced to shreds.”

“Hmm, that’s amazing. But he’s expensive, right?”

“Fufufufu, you’d think so. But he’s not. The truth is, he’s a swordsman boasting an interesting history with our firm... to make matters quick, he’s a problem child.”

“Then I can hire him for cheaper than the others?”

“How intuitive, dear customer.”

She made an obviously-feigned look of surprise, with an insincere smile on her face. “So how much is he?”

The moment I said that, Gustav’s profile disappeared from the display.

“Ah, my apologies, dear sir. At this very moment, the short-lived swordsman Gustav has passed away.”

“... Oh, so that’s what you meant by short-lived.”

“He always had a tendency towards self-harm.”

Sobbing, she rubbed a handkerchief against the corners of her eyes. Of course, from what I could see of her crisp-dry canthus, she didn’t have a single atom of sympathy.

“More importantly, don’t you have anyone better? How should I put it, calm even in a forest inhabited by monsters, with a low hourly wage?”

Ahem, the woman cleared her throat with a prim face. “If I may be so rude, sir.

“The job of hired soldier is one with a constant risk of losing one’s life. The reason for their high hourly wage is by no means our pursuit of higher profit margins. Please think of it as the cost of their lives.”

“... I’m well aware of that. Meaning, it’s the insurance costs, right?”

“... God, you sure are a teaser, dear sir ♥. If you knew, you should have said it sooner!”

After showing a completely forced smile, she touched her fingertip to the touch panel, and swiped to change the screen.

“But to talk business, soldiers and insurance go hand in hand. To us, you are definitely a customer, but while being a customer, you are also a contractor. If a

mercenary suffers a severe wound on the job, or in the worst case, they pass away, you will face a compensation fee even greater than the contract fee. If you'll let me be direct, can you prepare over a hundred million in cold hard cash?"

... Erk, she stabs the painful spots.

There was mercenary business all over the world. Because this business was more profitable than any other industry in the world.

There were plenty of things to hurt people in the world. Especially because of that thing called magic, no matter where they were, humans couldn't find quiet sleep at night.

The one who took advantage of that mentality was the mercenary dispatch business.

Their dispatch company was like an intermediary to the mercenaries scattered over the world. Acting as middleman between those with power and those who wanted power was their job.

By registering with a dispatch company, mercenaries could find work, and by making requests to the firm, clients could find mercenaries looking for work.

The company took a registration fee from the mercenaries, and an agency fee from the client. It was an exceedingly simple business.

In the past, that business model was mainstream. But these days, with more competitors on the market, they weren't making as much as they had been before.

If there were only one dispatch firm in the world, then the world's mercenaries would only be able to use that one. But with multiple ones in existence, there was no need to take up any one company's services. The mercenaries only had to leave themselves to whoever would assertively scout out work for them.

But then the dispatch firms wouldn't be able to maintain themselves. In order to gather as many clients as possible, they had to constantly mediate for talented mercenaries, and appeal that they were able to employ them.

There's no way a client would pay an introduction fee for a dispatch firm down on its luck.

So what made its entry on the scene was the long-term hire system.

The merit of this system was, that if a mercenary registered and remained faithful to a single company, as long as there were still requests coming in, the company would guarantee their living expenses.

For mercenaries who never knew when they would be getting work, the merit of a stable source of income was a large one. On top of that, from the dispatch firm's point of view, they could constantly have prodigious mercenaries stationed with them, so it was a plus for both sides.

Due to the arrival of this system, mercenaries became a large, flourishing business. But while there wouldn't have been any particular problems if it ended there, the problem was that it went on.

At first, the mercenaries were thankful their living costs were being covered, but their requests gradually began to escalate. Give me a higher income, pay for my treatment, and implement a welfare program.

Of course, to the profitable dispatch firms, that wasn't a problem, but it wasn't as if all companies were doing well. Among the dispatch firms were small businesses whose management prowess was unable to keep up with the demands.

Of course, in the end, demands were just demands. The company could deny them. But if they denied the demands, the mercenaries would just quit, and search for better employment.

Without any mercenaries, there's no way the firms would succeed. So what they devised was life insurance.

Injury was indispensable to a mercenary's job. In the worst case scenario, even death was possible. But the higher the death rate was, the higher the insurance payout became.

If mercenaries faced large injury, or death on the job, the dispatch firms placed an insurance on those mercenaries so they could accept a large insurance payout.

The payout was paid by insurance companies, so at a glimpse, it looked like a logical business. But those insurance companies wouldn't stay silent and pay out those high sums.

It became the insurance company's job to thoroughly investigate where the fault lay on the job. And in the case the fault fell on the employer in the mercenary's working hours, the one to pay damages was the client hiring the mercenary, meaning a person like me.

I thought it was a really well-put-together thing. For if you put the theory of economics on it, human life became just another business chance.

Outside of my thoughts, the woman made a proposal.

"I have a general understanding of your price range. Unfortunately, with your budget, we will be unable to be of assistance. So here's my proposal, if it suits you, why not hire a freelance mercenary?"

Investigation (3)

“A freelance mercenary?”

I asked. There, the woman changed the touch display to an empty, white screen.

“Have you ever used an electronic bulletin board before?”

“No, I don’t really use those sorts of things.”

“I see. With these sorts of things, while they can be convenient, you cannot put too much trust into them, so it takes quite a bit of courage to use.”

The female staff said, “But,” as a preface.

“Just as there are soldiers attached to our firm like the ones I’ve shown you, there are people taking on freelance jobs. Unlike our soldiers, hiring a free mercenary won’t cost you any insurance fee, and you can negotiate the price with the individual in question, so you’ve the merit of being able to hire them for less than an employed one.”

“I understand the merits of using freelance workers, but aren’t there loads that you shouldn’t trust?”

I tried retorting, but that was brushed away with a smile.

“Dear sir. There is nothing in this world that costs more money than trust. If you want to hire someone trustworthy, then you’ll have to pay a high fee, and if you don’t want to pay money, then you can only hire someone untrustworthy. With your funding, it will be difficult to hire a soldier from our firm, so I do think it best you take freelance mercenaries into consideration.”

It was a rebuttal so sound I couldn’t even grumble.

To win in the trial, I needed evidence. I couldn’t help but want to investigate Claudia’s house. But that would rack up some costs.

I blame it all on poverty. When it really comes down to it, money is reliable.

If I used a bulletin, then sure enough, I’d probably be able to find a cheap,

freelance mercenary who'd take it on. But those who couldn't be hired by a firm were generally those hiding something dark.

There were swindlers, as well as criminals posing as mercenaries in name alone. It's true there were some strong freelancers who hated taking a kick from a firm's contract fee and decided to go independent, but finding such talents was a probability of whether there would even be one in a hundred or not.

... My chances were too low. But I guess I didn't have a choice.

"Understood. Then could you put up a mercenary recruitment request online?"

"Leave it to me. Our firm's site has a high access count, so I'm sure you'll find a skilled mercenary."

Saying that alone, the woman took out two forms, and put them on the table. One was for the company, and the other for me to keep. She took out a pen and spoke in a cheerful voice.

"Then please fill in your full name, address, and contact information."

I dispatched the pen, and signed the contract. After paying a final advertisement fee of ten thousand gold, I let out a sigh.

"Thank you for using our services. We'll put the request up at once, so if you'll give us a moment of your time... okay, the request has been successfully submitted to our bulletin. Please wait until you're contacted with an application."

"Um, by the way, how long does it usually take until an application comes in?"

"Who knows?"

The female staff made a business smile devoid of ill will as she tilted her head.

"Even if they're freelancers, it's not like they're always free. It may even take a week. If an application comes in, I'm sure they'll call the number you provided."

... Maybe it would have been best I try somewhere else.

When investigation had only just begun, I was feeling terribly tired.

Investigation (4) The Black Forest

The Dark Forest, also known as the 'Black Forest,' was an immense woodland covering over 10000 square kilometers in total.

A majority of it was packed tight with trees, more than eighty percent of them high-reaching conifers. A step in, and the light of day was cut off; even if it was noon on a sunny day, the forest's interior was always dark, with things lingering in the darkness.

Each and every tree was a vibrant pea green, but once they were so closely packed together, the pigment seemed deeper, and with how crowded it was, it looked as if they were all died a shade of black, so the people living in the area had taken to calling it the Black Forest.

However, once it reached into lowlands, high-quality broadleaf trees grew en masse, so in search of materials for furniture and instruments, hunters and lumberjacks would occasionally make their way in.

The Dark Forest's specialty wasn't just its high quality wood products. There were high-quality foodstuffs that could only be harvested on these lands, an edible mushroom called rhizopogon roseolus that could be sold for a high price.

There was also a strain of blueberry that would only grow in the Dark Forest, used as an ingredient to make famous high class wines...

"It's famous as the world's best wine, huh."

After putting in an application to the dispatchable soldiers corporation, I stopped by the library. I had pretty much finished looking over what could be found online, so I decided to hit up the library's resources next.

Looking out of the window, I saw the drizzle had turned to a downpour. Because of that, there were many people in the library, and if you didn't occupy a seat of your own, it seemed it would be snatched by another in no time.

Occasionally, some elderly or children would come in, and seeing them borrow towels from the librarian, I got the feeling there would be an increase in library patrons for a while to come.

Searching out books in the library, I found a surprising abundance of books pertaining to the Dark Forest.

History, geography, culture, there were tens of books on each genre, so I wasn't hard-pressed to find them, but I didn't have enough free time to read through all of them.

What I wanted to know about it was whether people lived in it or not. That alone.

So I tried probing a bit through its history, but no matter where I looked, all it said was while the first held some phantasmic delicacies, it hadn't the warmth for human inhabitation.

Surely enough, lured by the scent of money, many hunters would make their way there every year, but a majority of them were able to find their targets in the forest's shallow regions, acquiring their quota as soon as they entered, and going home. That was the orthodox pattern.

Seeing as how there wasn't any other information, either there weren't any hunters to adventure to the forest's depths, or everyone who went too far in ended up dead.

By the documents, the variety of monsters in the Dark Forest was plentiful, each and every one of them exceedingly ferocious, of belligerent temperament.

... The type I was worst at dealing with.

Monsters were separated into two large categories.

Larger than life monsters with nothing but brute strength going for them, Fiends.

Not only power, monsters that held special abilities to boot, Mythics.

There really were more scientific designations, but putting those aside, the problem lay in that the Dark Forest was thriving with both varieties.

Especially the Mythics: on top of already possessing monstrous strength, they were even able to use magic, making them exceedingly troublesome existences.

I've never seen them with these eyes, but it seems there are Mythics that can breathe fire from their mouths, and shoot lightning from their horns.

Meanwhile, there were Fiends who could kick up tornados through sheer brute force.

A normal human would never be able to match up. To step into such a place, I needed a pro of that field.

... The monsters were afraid of her. That's what Claudia said.

I'm no expert. But even if monsters were often feared by humans, I've never heard anything of them being afraid of humans.

However, according to some occult books, it seems the demon lord spent his childhood in this forest, and after he slaughtered every sort of monster from A to Z, they monsters had begun to fear him.

When it comes to that, he really is a demon lord... no, he really is a demon lord.

When you're in Grimbeld, it never feels too real, but when you fish up documents of other lands, there were many papers written on the demon lord.

The scars he left on the world were large, and the influence he left on the generations to come was unfathomable.

... That's why all these outlandish speculation comes up.

I wonder what sort of books were at Claudia's house. In an environment isolated from the physical world, those books were her only lead towards knowing the world outside.

If the information happened to be a lie, I'm sure her world would fall apart.

If everything she believed to be right was evil, and evil turned out to be justice, then what?

Usually, you wouldn't believe it. You'd deny it. The world must be the wrong one.

— What's that, how childish.

... But she's a child, come to think of it.

I spent a while reading through documents on the Dark Forest, but there wasn't any important information.

... Right, the hero Roland was supposed to have been born somewhere nearby...

I checked with the Dark Forest's map, as I began to question.

The demon lord's name first resounded through the world from the military state of Jahziehl.

The demon lord formed a terrorist organization of demi-humans there, and plotted to take down the government.

That ended in failure, but the marks he left behind remain to this day. The clash between the government and demon lord's army was fierce, putting out hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Towns were wiped off of the map. Even when it was a military state, it was as terrible as if the government's troops were inept, and if the alliance hadn't intervened, it wouldn't have been strange if the country itself fell.

... It was the demon lord's debut, I muttered in my heart.

On the other hand, when it comes to hero Roland, he was making a livelihood in the Republic of Arlegio as a mercenary, apparently.

It's still a mystery how a mere swordsman such as he was able to become the holy sword's wielder, and later a hero, but based on records, he was a considerably skilled swordsman no doubt.

I think his strength was just speculative. There were no specific documents about it, anyways. And his strength was surely on a level that could defeat the demon lord.

That's amazing in itself, but what I wanted to pay more attention to was the place he was said to reside.

Arlegio was a country situated directly to Jahziehl's west.

With the Dark Forest as a center point, there was Jahziehl to the southeast, and Arlegio to the south west.

The Republic of Arlegio's official name was the Nation State of Arlegio, and it was originally an ethnically homogenous nation, apparently.

Because of that, around ninety percent of their population were native Arlegians, but perhaps the hero was something else.

If the hero was native, it wouldn't be strange if there was more specific personal information on him.

Was he an illegal immigrant?

Austen Village where he was supposedly born was within the Republic of Arlegio.

... But there were few documents about him. Why would that be?

I never thought about it much to now, but whether they grow up to be hero or demon lord, their birth should leave some form of record.

They didn't have DNA testing fifty years ago, but they'd at least be able to find out his blood type, and even if they couldn't store it through digital medium, they could've at least filed it away in some government office.

Alregio was still a developing country, but it was a country with a firm government body.

They had health insurance, and a pension scheme. Shouldn't they have a family register?

It's because they were tied to strange titles like hero or demon lord that I ended up vaguely nodding my head. If they weren't anything special, just a normal person you'd find anywhere, shouldn't there be some other way of looking at it?

... What's this, is my head the outdated one?

Looks like I can't make fun of people of the past. As I remained unaware, the demon lord and hero had become entities of daydreams, perhaps I had begun handling them as something of fiends and spectres.

... Let's try looking at them as humans. If I do, I should be capable of digging deeper.

After the rebellion in Jahziehl, the demon lord took flight, chased by allied troops. For some reason, it wasn't Alregio, but the Commonwealth of Sodom that he made way for.

Among the signatories of the allied nations, Sadom was a considerably special region, a country that had put zeal into developing its defenses around magic weaponry.

On one side, the Republic of Alregio was a nation with a flourishing entertainment industry. While it did have an army, to be honest, their very characteristic was being weak.

With their 2000 border guards, I doubt they could win a war, and as I read a book on the commonwealth's history, I thought so as well.

Between Sadom and Alregio, if you were going to choose somewhere to run to, wouldn't it be Alregio?

Or so I thought as a military amateur, but perhaps the demon lord had some demon lord thoughts of his own, and I can't throw away the possibility the Commonwealth of Sadom was secretly conspiring with him.

This was within the region of speculation. But as I read the line in the history book that clearly stated Sadom was probably not in cahoots with the demon lord, I thought.

When he fled to the commonwealth, the demon lord apparently plundered three of its national treasures.

The Godragon's sword, the Goddess's raiment, and Death's Orbs.

They were magic tools that were handed down through the country for over five thousand years, and while they obviously held artistic value, their historic value was off the charts.

Of all else, they were magic relics left by the ones sung of as the strongest magic civilization, the Ararats, and it wasn't an exaggeration to call them the symbols of the country.

... Internally telling him not to steal such a thing, I looked at the Goddess' raiment's photo, and broke into a cold sweat.

Doesn't that look like what Claudia was wearing?

"Haha, no way."

The picture of a girl wrapped in a cloth of white, silk-like material was blown

up to fill a whole page of the book.

She was practically naked, but the cloth covered the important parts. If you took a pair of scissors to that cloth, and made a sensible blouse and skirt of it, it would be exactly what Claudia was wearing.

“... You can find white cloth anywhere.”

As I thought that, the cell phone in my jacket pocket let out a shrill ring.

I hurriedly left the library, and answered the phone in the entranceway.

“Hello?”

‘Um, is this a Mr. Daniel the Lawyer?’

The voice I heard from the speaker was a woman’s.

‘I saw your ad on the DSC bulletin board, but are you still taking applications for mercenary work?’

... If possible, I’d like to be hired at once, but is that alright? That overly slow voice resounded well through the heavy raindrops outside.

Investigation (5) Interview

When I opened the door, I was hit by the smell of herbs.

It was a café. It was the place I was to meet the applicant who called me at the library, but what I found was a café on a slight decline.

“Welcome.”

The middle-aged café master called over. “Table for one?”

“No, I’m meeting someone...”

I looked over the store’s interior. It was raining heavily outside, to an extent where you’d get wet even if you put out an umbrella. I was completely soaked, and to be honest, I felt a little awkward to enter the store like this.

The café was dark. There were orange lamps pouring light from the ceiling, but perhaps because of the years of use into it, or because it was plain shabby, I couldn’t help but smell the scent of mold.

“But it doesn’t look like she’s here yet.”

I called over to the middle-aged master. There were a few customers in the shop, but they all looked a little too old to be a mercenary.

More than that, the owner of the voice on the phone was a woman, and quite a young one at that. While there was definitely a woman in the store, I doubt there were any white-haired youngsters wearing aged spectacles around these parts.

I lowered myself into an open table, ordering a coffee. I also told the man to direct someone this way if they happen to be looking for a lawyer.

The middle-aged master moved his mustache up and down. “Understood,” he replied, returning to the depths of the counter with tranquil movements.

As it was a window seat, I could see the cityscape outside. The scenery I could see above the windowsill was dark, large grains of rain falling from the sky to the ground. A strong wind caused the window to clatter, leading me to imagine it breaking sometime along the way.

... Bing. The café's door opened, the bell hung on it rung.

"God, I'm all wet...!"

Turning, there was a young girl in her teens. With green, short-cut hair, and round, lovable eyes, the girl was wearing a yellow raincoat.

Just another customer... I thought, but there was something dangerous hanging at her waist.

... Do all girls these days walk around with swords? I already have some precedent.

"I should've brought an umbrella."

The girl sorrowfully closed her eyes, stroking her wet bangs to the side. On her forehead dripping with water, was a small but conspicuous scar.

"Madam, if it pleases you, use this."

The master approached his new customer, and handed out a towel.

"Oh, thank you mister!"

Her pessimistic expression had all but vanished, her face suddenly giving a radiance as she accepted the towel, drying her hair before her face, and returning her bangs to their place. The mark on her forehead was covered up.

I averted my eyes from her, and looked outside. The force of the rain seemed to have lessened somewhat from before.

... Is it going to let up? More importantly, it's already passed the promised time.

I looked at my wristwatch. I myself am by no means particularly strict when it comes to time. I wouldn't really mind if someone was five or ten minutes late.

But that's about private matters. Right now, I haven't a minute to spare. I had to gather up evidence before Claudia's next hearing.

... My time is limited. If it's someone with a tendency to be late, then I'll refrain from hiring them.

"Sire, here is your order."

I heard a voice call from behind. Looking, I found the middle-aged master bringing coffee over. I could smell it all the way from here.

... If she doesn't come by the time I finish this cup, I'll try elsewhere.

..... That was a wasted ten thousand.

With leisurely movements, the master placed the coffee cup on the table. Coffee was all I ordered, but after leaving the cup, he didn't seem like he was going to return to the counter.

"My apologies, but you are the lawyer, right?"

"Me? Yes, that's right..."

"The truth is, the customer over there is searching for a Daniel the Lawyer, is there any mistake?"

"Over there?"

I looked in the direction he indicated with his hand. There stood the girl in the yellow coat from before, looking my way with intrigue.

Her eyes were sparkling, and when our eyes met, she happily waved her hand.

... This has got to be a lie. I never ordered a brat.

By the time I had noticed it, the sound of the rain had stopped.

Investigation (6) Interview

“I thought I would be fine if I got just a little wet, but it was no good at all.”

The girl sat on the opposite couch of the booth, as she used the towel to dry of her nape. All the while, she gave an embarrassed laugh of, “Ehehehe.”

... Really, this is a mercenary? Hasn't there been some sort of mistake?

My anxiety only grew. She left the sword at her hip on the side of the sofa, calling out, “Hey, master! A hot cocoa over here!

The middle-aged master's fuzzy mustache moved ever-so slightly.
“Understood, young lady.”

“Hehe, ehehehe,” The girl raised an eerie laugh. “He called me a lady, how embarrassing.”

“Um, there's no doubt you're the one who just called me, right?”

“Ah, yes! I'm Jessica Belliqueuse. You have my uthmost gratitude for taking up my mercenary services this time around.”

She stumbled over a few of those words. I have no idea if the individual herself noticed it.

... She probably didn't. Her smile wasn't perturbed in the slightest, and seeing her conduct, it was clear.

What should I do, should I just decline? But if she can get on as a freelance mercenary at her age, perhaps she's actually some amazing talent.

For now, let's just get on with the interview. If she proves no good, I'll just refuse.

“I'm Daniel Lockhart, a lawyer. What I want to request this time is...”

“Monster hunting!?”

When I was still talking, she interrupted me. She slammed both hands on the table, and leaned her body towards me.

“No, it's not. Well, there's a possibility you'll be fighting monsters, but I'd like

to avoid battle as much as possible.”

I’d refrain from her getting into battle with evidence on her person.

“Leave it to me,” Jessica stuck out her absent chest and declared. “Even if I look like this, I’m a magic swordsman. My biggest forte is escape magic!”

“Hmm, is that so.”

I thought... is that something to be proud of?

“Ah, of course I’m really good in battle too. My sword, this flamberge is imbued with a special sort of magic, and if you cut with it, you can set things alight.”

Jessica took the sword in hand, and pulled it from its sheath. The swaying luster of its blade waved to and fro like fire, and it looked like it had considerably high aptitude to kill or maim.

“Set things alight? Meaning whatever you cut catches fire?”

“Exactly. One cut, and the flames won’t die out until the foe is burnt out.”

“Hmm, that’s an amazing ability.”

I was honestly impressed.

“Or so I’ve heard.”

My admiration was wasted.

“Eh? Which is it? When it comes down to it, do they burn, or not?”

“A skilled Magic Swordsman could do it. But with my magic, the most I can do is singe them a bit, so...”

Jessica scratched her head. And, “Ehehe,” she raised an off-key laugh. It seems she used that laugh whenever she felt awkward.

“But it’ll be find, Mr. Daniel!

That was strangely over-familiar.

“As a sword, the flamberge is a top-class article. With this sword and my skills, a monster or two would be repelled in no time.”

What I’m requesting isn’t just a monster or two, it’s the exploration of a forest

with hundreds of thousands of monsters lurking within...

I'm sure I put it on the form.

"I'll ask for argument's sake, but do you have any actual experience fighting monsters?"

"Please don't be surprised."

Jessica made a victorious face as if she had been waiting for that question. If she did say 'none' here, I planned to deny her on the spot.

"The truth is, I've defeated a dragon before."

Now that's plainly amazing. Then is she actually skilled?

"Ah, you're doubting me. Then let me present a lawyer a piece of evidence."

First, she lifted up her bangs with her right hand.

"This is the scar from when I fought the dragon a year ago."

There was that fresh scar on her forehead. But I did have one question...

"Isn't the wound a bit small for a dragon?"

I had been expecting something larger. I know it's strange to place my expectations on someone's misfortune, but that held more persuasive power than this girl before me.

"E-ehehehe," lowering her hair, she gave her off-key voice. "I-I still have more."

"Putting her hand into the depths of her coat, she took out a wallet, and produced a photo from it.

This is the photo from when I defeated the dragon that appeared in Yggdra Village. I begged the village chief, and he let me take a commemoration photo with it."

I took the photo in hand. There definitely was a dragon. Its size was just around two meters, maybe more.

I've never seen a real dragon before, so I can't say anything certain, but if this was the true form of the world's so-called brutal beast, the Dragon, then it was

right about time I felt let-down.

“I-I worked hard to defeat it,” Jessica turned her face away. She spoke softly.
“It was really strong.

... Well, if she has enough strength to take down a dragon, I guess there isn't a problem.

Truth be told, I was uneasy. But with my budget, perhaps I'd only be able to hire these sorts. For now, let's compromise and give her a passing grade in strength.

Investigation (7) Interview

... Ahem, after clearing my throat once to clear up the air.

“What I want to request of you... is evidence collection.”

I gave a brief outline of the trial. But even so, I had a duty of confidentiality to my client; I could only give the feel of the incident, and that I needed to investigate the defendant's house at all costs. I didn't touch the core of it.

On my words, Jessica nodded as she fervently took memos. As she scribbled notes with her utmost effort, her gestures made me recall the motions of a squirrel eating.

“So to summarize...” Jessica wrote as she spoke. “You want me to go to that Dark Forest place, and conduct an investigation?”

That was a strange way to put it. Could it be this girl...

“Ah, but the way, there's something I'd like to confirm with you.”

“Yes? What could it be?”

She was making a crisp expression. Perhaps this was her serious mode.

“Do you know about the Dark Forest?”

“Hmm? I know it. It's got to be a forest.”

Without a single cloud across her face, she gave a cheerful reply.

... No, that's true. But what is this? She isn't wrong, but I get the feeling she was gravely mistaken somewhere.

“I don't know its specific geography, but can you get there by tram?”

“... Tram wouldn't work out.”

“Then airplane?”

Jessica replied with a tilt of her head.

I moved what I'd prepared beforehand from my bag to the table.

“What's that?”

Jessica looked into it with a curious look on her face.

“An airplane ticket. You’ll be taking an airship from Grimbeld to the Commonwealth of Sodom, but you’ll only be flying for that leg of the trip. The rest you have to walk.”

“Then I’m travelling abroad!”

As her face suddenly lit up, I found myself at my wit’s end, but anyways, I pushed talks forward.

“By the way, do you have a passport?”

“Ehehe, of course I do. I’m a freelance mercenary. I have one, I’m telling you. And in this day and age, is there anyone who doesn’t have one?”

... Claudia didn’t have one.

... No, she doesn’t have a nationality in the first place, so she can’t have one.

“So what am I supposed to do? Will I be guarding you?”

“No, you don’t have to guard me.” I took a sip of coffee. “I have other things to do.”

“I’ll be heading to Westminster Hotel to investigate the crime scene. I’d like you to go to the site alone, and investigate around there.”

“Okay, so just investigating. That sounds easy!”

I unintentionally spat out my coffee. “Are you alright?” Jessica handed over a napkin, so I accepted it and used it to wipe my mouth.

“Um, I’ll just throw this out here, but did you know the Dark Forest is designated quarantine zone?”

“Yes, I know!”

For some reason, Jessica sounded happy. Does this woman understand the gravity of the situation? I almost felt like slapping her.

“It’s that, right? It’s a bit of a dangerous place, so you can’t let your kids go near it.”

... Wow, she’s not wrong, but what is this. I get the feeling she’s completely

off.

“And wait, how old are you anyways?”

“Eh? You can’t just ask a girl how old she is.”

“No, you’re not even at an age where it matters, right?”

Jessa gave an, “Ehehehe,” as she awkwardly scratched her head.

“The truth is, I’m eighteen.”

... That’s way too young. “What about school?”

“I finally got into college, and I do plan on attending. I’m doing mercenary work to earn my tuition.”

“College, wait, didn’t you apply for a scholarship? They hand them out to almost everyone here?”

“I did apply. But that money, I kinda gambled it away and...”

... Ehe, she laughed, “Ah, but I still have more than half of it left. I can’t help but need another hundred thousand.”

Hundred thousand? She emphasized that word.

“I-I see. Hmm, so you only need another 100000G?”

“Hmm, let’s see. Yep, that’s right. I need another 100000G.”

To be honest, I didn’t have the funding to hire a skilled mercenary. That’s why I searched for a freelance mercenary, but even so, I had been prepared to pay five hundred thousand.

But a hundred thousand, is it?

I looked at her. Noticing she was being watched, Jessica laughed and made an awkward expression.

... This girl definitely doesn’t know the market value of mercenaries.

For a moment, a dark emotion welled in my head.

Ah, that’s no good. Just what was I thinking, trying to cheat this girl? But hiring a mercenary for only a hundred thousand gold was quite a charming offer.

“By the way, do your parents know you’re doing this job?”

“Ah, um, truth be told, I don’t have parents.

“Eh?” Surprised as I was, I made a victory pose within.

“I lost them in an accident three years ago, and since then, I’ve started doing these mercenary jobs for the income.

“I see, that must have been tough.”

I sympathized. But inside, I thought.

... Meaning, if this child dies, no one will bear a grudge against me?

When a mercenary died, the most troubling thing would be the bereaved family demanding consolation money. Since they’re signing onto dangerous jobs, they should be more than resolved for death, but even so, the family would often demand reimbursement.

When taken to a normal trial, first off, the employer never loses. But the one before my eyes was an eighteen year old girl clearly not fit to be a mercenary.

If I hired such an innocent girl as a mercenary, and she died, I’d definitely lose in court.

... But if there was no one to sue, there wasn’t the concept of loss in the first place. And if she died, I wouldn’t have to pay the request fee.

I gently grasped her hands, and spoke. “Your words have moved me. I’ll hire you.”

“Really? Um, thank you Mr. Daniel!”

Seeing her face light up like that, I felt as if I had deceived her.

... I haven’t, right? I just skillfully concealed the truth, right?

Ah, I’ve become quite the filthy adult, that’s the sort of feeling I got.

Investigation (8) Interview

“Then could you sign this contract?”

I took a contract and written oath out of my bag, lining them on the table. When I handed a pen over, Jessica took it without the slightest doubt, writing her name on the line without particularly reading the contents.

My head thudded in my chest as I watched over it. I mean, the contract clearly stated, even if she died, not the slightest bit of responsibility would fall upon the employer, meaning me. If she read something like that, it wouldn't be strange for a girl in her teens to feel dread.

But without the slightest sign of that, she finally signed, and the contract was complete.

“I'm done.”

“Thank you,” I put the form away in my bag. “Then shall we move onto the specifics?”

“First, what I want you to do is find the defendant's house.”

“It's somewhere in the forest?”

“I don't know the specifics, I immediately replied. “ But it's next to a river, apparently.”

Jessica tilted her head and asked. “But aren't there plenty of rivers?”

“That isn't so,” I denied. “The only river flowing through the Dark Forest is the Flaste River. It doesn't branch at all, so if you proceed from upstream down, you should be able to find it.”

“Where's up stream?”

I folded out the map. It contained the Dark Forest, and its surrounding countries.

“The Commonwealth of Sodom is to the Dark Forest's north. The Flaste River flows from there. It just proceeds in a straight line south.”

Okay, okay, Jessica took her notes. “Teacher, I have a question!”

“What should I do when I find the house?”

“Good question.” Without any particular retorts, I chose to go with the flow. She had a bit of a befuddled personality, but once you got used to it, it was a little fun.

“After you find it, what I want you to do is to contact me.”

“But the Dark Forest is no-man’s land, right?” Jessica scrunched her brow, thinking as she spoke. “Do they get any cellphone reception there?”

“You’re quite sharp,” I felt a little impressed. “Of course, there’s no reception in the Dark Forest. No matter how hard you search, it’s outside range. You can’t use a cell phone.”

... And so, I made a preface, as I took out the other item I had prepared beforehand, and placed it on the table.

“Use this satellite phone. If it’s this, you’ll be able to connect no matter where you are on the planet.”

... Also, it’s a rental, so don’t carry it home, I emphasized. Satellite phones are expensive. I don’t want to pay reparations.

“An airship, a satellite phone, it’s a little exciting, isn’t it.”

As she looked to be in strangely high spirits over a phone, I handed over a digital and analogue film camera as well.

“Huh? Why are there two cameras?”

“As a precaution,” I replied at once. “You can’t use a digital camera if the battery runs out, and there are some places film cameras can’t capture.”

“Places?”

“Film becomes useless when hit with x-ray radiation. Apparently they’re out there, monsters that emit x-rays. And when they x-ray it in the airport, put the camera in a separate bin.”

“Alright. Understood!”

Jessica muttered, “I see, this is a learning experience,” as she wrote down

everything I had said.

Perhaps she really was a good girl.

“So, about after you find the defendant’s house, first I’d like you to photograph its inside and outside.”

“Won’t that be illegal breaking and entering?”

“It won’t,” I said distinctly. “You can only be charged with illegal breaking and entry because the country has such a law. There are no laws in no-man’s land. So no matter what you do, you won’t be charged.”

“I see. So no-man’s land isn’t a foreign country in the first place.”

“That’s how it is,” my conscience hurt a bit as I wondered just what sorts of bad things I was teaching this child.

“When you take it, make sure to use both the digital and film cameras.”

“Okay!”

Jessica gave an energetic reply.

“So after you take the pictures, I want you to make off with whatever’s in the house.”

“Sure, but what if there are a lot of things?”

“I’ll leave it to your selection. If possible, I want something related to her birth. Especially the defendant’s father and grandfather. Please search to see if there’s any information about them.”

“Alright, got it.”

Maybe it was around time her head was about to pop. She scratched her green hair.

“I’m in a hurry,” I said. “Based on the evidence you find there, the defendant’s life to come will change.

Jessica blinked her round eyes. “Her life?”

“That’s right. It’s a huge responsibility. You’re the only one I can count on. Think you can do it?”

“Yes! Without any signs of deep thought, Jessica answered. “I’ll do it! Leave it to me!”

She likely made that statement without thinking over anything. But since the moment I got roped into this case, it was the first time I ever felt relieved.

... For now, I’ve found someone who’ll be my ally.

... Really, I felt sorry for doing something like deceiving such a good girl.

Investigation (9) Hotel

After that, I spent some more time in the café, speaking to Jessica Belliqueuse to see what sort of person she was.

As she laughed with an awkward face, she'd answer pretty much anything you asked, but she didn't really like talking about private matters, and if you asked about her family, she'd laugh, "Ehehehe," to avoid the question.

... She had a few secrets. Of course, as long as she did her job properly, I didn't care about that.

If there was something I learned, it was that she already received an acceptance letter from the college, and as long as she paid the matriculation fee, she'd be a college student starting next year. Of course, she didn't have that money, so if played poorly, she may have to try again next year.

... She had no ability to plan ahead, that was a little unsatisfactory.

A mere eighteen years of age, apparently two months to nineteen... when I got a general grasp of the female magic swordsman's lineage, I finally decided to leave the café.

... The flight was tonight. When I told her she'd be arriving at the destination point tomorrow morning, Jessica's mouth formed a smile.

"I'll be off, Mr. Daniel."

As she said that with an utterly unclouded expression, she waved her hand and ran off.

Once I confirmed I could no longer see her back, I turned and made my way to my office. Just as she had something to do, so did I.

Before returning, I dropped by the bookstore to see if they had any material on Westminster Hotel.

Taking a travel brochure in hand, as expected of a first-rate tourist hotel, I thought. I found it at once. After purchasing it, I opened it at once outside the shop. After confirming the hotel's phone number, I called it on my phone.

Briiiinnnggg... the dial tone continued for a while, before I heard the throaty voice of a male.

‘Thank you for calling. You have reached the Westminster Hotel.’

“Hello, I’m...”

For a moment, I thought of naming myself, but I refrained. Rather than unnecessarily putting him on guard, it felt best I pretended to be a customer.

“Um, the truth is I’m searching for a hotel I could lodge at tomorrow. Are there still any vacant rooms?”

‘My apologies, sir,’ unsuited to his deep voice, the person on the other line continued on in a courteous, and polite tone. ‘At present, the hotel’s business has been suspended. We are not taking any room reservations.’

“Suspended?”

In this period of December? No, it’s a hotel where a murder took place, so did they close to prevent a scandal?

I thought for a moment, but then I saw in red letters, in the corner of the brochure.

※ The hotel has temporarily been closed for the months of October, November, and December for renovations.

It stipulated.

Wait, it was closed in November? Does that mean there were no guests on the day of the incident? And if it was currently closed, then who am I speaking to right now?

“Then I can’t visit the hotel? I really wanted to see the viewing platform...”

‘If that’s what it is, then have no worry,’ the person on the phone was trying to make his voice sound as cheerful as possible. But as his natural voice was throaty, it only sounded even more threatening to the other party.

... This guy wasn’t cut out for the service industry.

As I held such a trivial impression, the voice continued on its polite explanation.

‘Our hotel is, at present, open for visits twenty four hours a day. The viewing platform, of course, alongside the park, indoor pool, restaurant, sports gym, and many other facilities are open for public use. If you find yourself in the area, by all means, stop by.’

... But he added something on.

‘A portion of the viewing platform and the park have been closed off, so please keep that in mind.’

The viewing platform and park. Meaning the murder scene.

“Is that so? Then I’ll definitely stop by tomorrow.”

‘We are pleased to have you.’

The throaty voice said amicably.

“By the way,” I said after I confirmed his voice had died down. “Are you an employee at the hotel?”

‘It is as you say. I am the one charged with managing this hotel, my name is Rijkaard.’

The manager? Why is such a person on receptions?

Reading my question, Rijkaard went on. ‘As all of our hotel staff is currently on holiday, I am managing the receptions.’

“Is that so? But if that’s the case, wouldn’t there be a problem with security?”

‘Perish the thought,’ he hurriedly denied it. ‘Our hotel’s security is always perfect, and even now, we have a security team stationed up twenty four hours a day. Please feel at ease.’

And wasn’t one of those guards just killed? I wanted to retort, but as I was playing a virtuous outsider, I didn’t put my mouth out on the matter.

After that, I tried talking a bit more, but I didn’t find any particular leads. After hanging up the phone, I chewed over our exchange.

... At the time of the crime, the hotel wasn’t in service.

But it was free entry. The manager did say a portion was off limits, but that was surely the crime scene.

Meaning it should've all been free access on the day of the crime, and it was simple to enter both the park and the viewing platform.

What's this, it's a terribly strange feeling. If I were to put this emotion to words...

... It was too well put together, wasn't it?

It was an environment as if setting the stage right for the murder.

Without any guests, and all the staff on holiday.

It was free to enter, but the security system was active.

Oy, oy, isn't that the perfect timing to do something without anyone getting in the way?

Is it coincidence? Or inevitability?

No, there's no way it's coincidence. Someone was pulling the strings. I could only think so.

Investigation (10) Hotel

After returning to the office, I found my documents scattered around the empty space.

Because of that truant, the office had become a space that was only wide. No desk or chairs. That's why the floor was the only place for my papers. As it was, there was no where I could sit.

... I guess I'll clean up.

But even if I say that, cleaning it all was troublesome, so I just secured enough space for me to take a seat, lowering myself there, and restarting my investigations.

As long as I couldn't stay at the hotel, I thought it best I find one nearby to stay, and the result of me checking all around the place...

'My apologies, our hotel is already fully booked.'

I would only get those unsympathetic replies. I decided I would be heading for the site tomorrow.

... And I'd be back by the end of the day.

Westminster Hotel wasn't so far from the office. By tram, just around two hours.

... But if I wanted a proper investigation, it would be better the more time I had.

That in my mind, I ended the day's investigations there. Looking out the office, the air was clear with the letup of the rain, and because of the evening sun, the sky was dyed a shade of red.

The sunset clearer than usual dazzled my eyes. I picked up the papers littered around the office floor one by one.

With the documents I'd investigated in the library, the material had gone up quite a bit. Within that, there was a photo of what was probably Westminster Hotel's exterior.

Looking at the exterior alone, the hotel looked like a robust old castle. Its walls laid out of black brick conveyed a sense of the many years they'd protected that castle.

... I'm sure they purposely designed it like that.

But no matter how much they smoothed over its appearance, what it contained was a sightseeing hotel with the latest in security systems, and various forms of entertainment facilities.

I put the necessary papers in my bag, and returned to my room.

I felt terribly tired today. On my return, the clock in the room still displayed seven o'clock, but I collapsed onto the bed, and fell asleep at once.

The next day. Waking up before my alarm clock could go off, I took a shower, put on my suit, and headed to the site, my bag in hand.

The early morning tram was empty. Sitting in a seat, it took around two hours of sway to reach the destination station.

I stepped onto the platform, and by the time I had passed through the automated ticket barrier, my bag had begun to shake.

... What's this?

I wondered for a moment if a bomb had been planted, but come to think of it, I recalled I kept my own satellite phone in my bag so Jessica could reach me. I hurriedly pulled it out.

"Hell..."

'Good morning! Mr. Daniel!'

I could hear a bit of static mixed in, but the voice through the speaker was clear enough. Though that may just be because Jessica's voice was ridiculously loud...

"Good morning. Where are you now?"

'Well, you see, truth is I've already arrived at the airport, and I'm about to set off for the Dark Forest, but...'

Her phrasing was full of hidden implication.

... What? I had a bad feeling about this.

‘E-ehehehe, please listen without getting angry. Truth is, after that, made for the airport at once.’

“Okay. And?”

‘E-ehehe. S-so you see, with the airplane ticket in hand, I went right onto the plane, but...’

“What is it, did you forget your passport?”

When I said that, ‘That one’s fine. What I forgot was my wallet.’ She gave a cheerful reply.

‘Mr. Daniel. I haven’t eaten a thing since yesterday. I’m starving. What do I do?’

... (##° Д°)

... Calm down. This is actually a good thing, isn’t it? That it’s only a problem of this level?

Let’s be optimistic. The situation isn’t as bad as I thought.

I frantically held down the broiling feeling in my gut. Anyways, let’s resolve the problem.

“Understood. For now, I’ll send some money, so wait right there. Stand by near the airport’s teller window.”

‘T-thank you.’

Form the satellite phone, I could hear a pitiful voice of, ‘I’m hungry...’ before I hung up.

I went to the bank in front of the station, and filled out the form to send money overseas. Well, I’m sure she’ll be fine with fifty thousand G. After converting it to Sodom’s currency, I sent it.

While I was doing all that, it had already become noon.

... That idiot. She needlessly ate away my time.

It seems I would have to take a bus to get to the hotel, so as I waited at the

stop for my transportation to arrive, I received another call from Jessica. I instantly picked up after one ring.

‘Mr. Daniel! The money came! Thank you!’

I could hear the sound of her chewing something. She was already eating.

... Did I make a mistake in my personnel selection? That doubt would never disappear.

‘But Mr. Daniel. When I accepted it, they took 2000\$ away as commission, is that alright?’

“Haha, don’t mind it.”

I spoke. And I thought... I won’t take this from your reward. It’s a necessary expense.

“More importantly, I switched to the main topic. “Do you know where the Dark Forest is?”

‘Yes! I’ve got it down perfectly! The mister manning the shop told me all sorts of things! Eh? Beer? Yes, I’ll have some!’

“Oy, don’t get any friendlier with that shop-keep geezer. Do your job.”

Jessica let out a despondent voice. ‘I’m sorry.’

“As long as you understand. Once you’ve eaten, get a start on your work.”

‘Yes! See you later, Mr. Daniel!’

“... Yeah, see you soon.

The bus came just as the call cut off. Letting off a pssssssh of pressurized air before my eyes, the doors opened up.

... I should go.

I boarded the bus, and set way for the site.

Investigation (11)

When I stepped off the bus, I was in the middle of a forest. The unpaved road consisted of moist soil, making it terribly hard to walk.

The interior of a December forest was horribly ominous. Each and every tree stark naked, their frozen bark not giving off the smallest breath of life.

... A dead forest.

As I touched a sharply pointed tree branch, it raised a snap as it easily gave in. I tossed the branch to the side of the road, hastening on.

I doubt this forest would have any life 'til the come of spring. Now it didn't feel alive at all.

... It was larger than I thought.

With the cloudy sky as its backdrop, I looked up at the old castle before me. The black brick covering its old-construct exterior had not a fragment of cheeriness.

It was a place I'd expect to find monsters lurking. I had heard it was a first-rate tourist hotel, so I thought it would have more a sense of freshness, and I had arbitrarily framed up my own sparkly impression, but this was the exact opposite.

... Where a demon lord would live.

For some reason, that's what I thought. If it were this hotel, I'm sure it wouldn't be strange if a demon lord lived in its walls.

When I took the first step forward, I got the feeling someone was watching me from behind.

I couldn't help but turn around. There was nothing there but naked trees and shrubs sprouting from the barren ground.

No one... no, there was.

Atop a tall tree branch, I saw a black mass.

It was a crow. A crow was staring fixatedly at me, and after a large caw, it spread out its wings, and flapped its way into the dull sky.

A cold wind blew, sending shivers down my spine.

Someone was... there. Just who was it, Claudia?

Who invited you here?

Who sent you the letter?

I forcefully removed my eyes rooted onto the trees, and started off towards the hotel once more. For some reason, my heart was raising alarm bells, and even after opening the front door and entering the hotel, the intensity of its beat showed no signs of dying down.

The entrance hall was dim, with only a green emergency exit light above it. Even so, because of the light streaming in from the window, I could dimly make out the inside.

The hotel's interior, contrary to its outward appearance, matched up with my image of a first-rate hotel. Well-polished marble floor, and sofas to relax. Tasteful tables, and an antique clock on the wall. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling had an emphasis on its design, and I'm sure it was lit up, it would light the space vibrantly.

But that's a tale of when the place was in business. At present, this hotel wasn't open for that.

He said the restaurant and gym were running, but I had to wonder. That sounded dubious.

I looked at the guide board in a corner of the lobby. Based on it, the restaurant and gym were in the basement, and there weren't any particular landmarks on the first floor.

For now, shall we look around?

After thinking for a moment, I decided to head for the park first.

Investigation (12) Hotel Park

As the park was outside the hotel, I turned back, and left through the front door. I recalled the map of the incident I had received from the boss.

... As I recall, it should be right next to the hotel, right?

I moved alongside the wall to the park. Along the way, there were strange stone statues, and hedges cut into human form, so I'm sure these were the strange objet d'art the boss talking about.

It's true the statues here were somewhat odd. But I was hard-pressed to find exactly what was so strange. Then I noticed.

"She's terribly made, that woman."

I looked at the statue that was likely in the shape of the goddess, and muttered. While made of voluptuous body, her arms and legs were supple, so I thought she had to be a considerably beauty as I turned to look at her face, but there was the face of a woman making a terribly unsightly expression.

... Just why?

That wasn't the only ugly statue in the park. There were a few statues modeled after monsters, but each and every one of them was making a terrible facial expression, and as things were, it weakened the impression they were about to do battle.

Continuing through the park, I eventually reached my destination point. There was a knight on a white horse just as I'd seen in the pictures, but looking closely, as expected, the statue's expression was terrible as well.

... Just what were they trying to do? The people of this hotel?

It really bothered me, but I got the feeling it was irrelevant to this case, so I put it aside.

For now, I took a photo of the site. The knights on his white horse held his real sword up high. As one would think, there wasn't any blood left on that sword.

... Come to think of it, this was a crime scene, but they didn't have that.

Normally, in the case of a criminal case, unless there were any special circumstance, the scene was only preserved from three days to a week. And since murder was one of those special circumstances, the scene was usually preserved until the case was resolved.

The definition of 'case resolved' depended on the district whose jurisdiction it fell under, but around these parts, the timing was defined as once the suspect was apprehended and handed a guilty verdict.

As long as it wasn't an especially special case, the first trial of a criminal hearing rarely stretched longer than a year or two.

As the number of judges and prosecuting officers was overwhelmingly insufficient for the number of criminal cases, the time allotted to a single case never ended up too long.

The police of this country were proficient. They were proficient, but there's no guarantee they never made a mistake.

The possibility of false charges... existed. I could only believe in that as I investigated.

I looked over the park. Turning to the hotel, I could see a glass –sided wall, a passageway on the other side.

... So that's where it was taken.

I recalled the trial. As I recall, the security camera stationed there had been taking footage of the park.

I approached the hotel. Looking over every nook of the passage through the glass, there was a camera, sure enough.

The lens was motionlessly fixed on me, as it continued recording without rest. The camera fastened onto the ceiling had a red light on, so it seems it was still filming now.

... Then someone's in the guard room today?

I suddenly began to feel embarrassed as I removed myself from the glass window. But even so, my actions up to then had already been seen by some

guard far away, so it was too late.

I turned to show it my back. Recalling the camera footage, I checked to see if there was anything different in the current scenery.

... There wasn't any snow. Of course.

A month had already passed since the incident took place. It would be stranger if the snow from then was still piled up.

I slowly approached the knight on his white horse, and looked behind it; it had been obscured by the statue up to now, but there was a white circle on the ground.

The identity of the round line was a length of rope, and a plastic plate was fastened on top. I'm sure this held the role of a place keeper. The plastic plate had the number 4 written on it.

This was evidence of the police preserving the scene. Number 4 was the evidence number of whatever was seized there, and the string was to show its exact placement. Normally, they'd use chalk to leave marks where the evidence was, but I doubt chalk would draw on the park's artificial grass.

... No, that's wrong.

At the time of the crime, this site was covered in snow. It didn't matter whether it was land or lawn, they simply couldn't use chalk.

And on that space... when you think about it, it's clear what was there on the day of the crime.

Seeing the positioning of the statue, there was no doubt about it. On the day of the crime, what was left here was the victim's arm.

The victim fell from the sky, collided with the statue, and had his arm thoroughly severed at the joint.

A terrible scene revived in my mind. I shook my head once to hammer the vision out of my brain.

If this is where the arm went, then where did the all-important body go?

I recalled the security footage. Based on that tape, the severed arm fell right

to the ground, while the remaining body fell onto the hedge, bounced, and fell to the other side.

There was a hedge nearby the stone statue. It looked small on camera, but actually standing before it, it was even taller than me.

Since I'm a meter seventy, the hedge had to be larger. Maybe it was around two meters?

I took a detour, and circled around to the other side. The body had fallen there, so naturally, I thought there would be one on this side as well.

But there wasn't anything behind the hedge, nothing but artificial lawn.

... Huh? Why isn't there any thread or a number plate here?

Something that should have been there was gone. That's all it was, yet I was assailed by a strange feeling.

If it was related to the case, the police would collect any and everything as evidence. Of all else, when one part of the body was properly stored as evidence, what's the meaning of there being nothing done to the main portion?

... Should I check up with Cate later?

I felt uneasy about asking her for anything, but this was a lawyer's job. There was no helping it.

I sighed. I looked around the area some more, but I felt even if I stayed any longer I wouldn't find anything. The park was awfully tidy, and the statues were the only things that stood out.

Finally taking a photo of the park, I returned to the entrance hall.

Investigation (13) Hotel Guard Room

Slipping out of the entrance hall into a side hallway, I saw the same park scenery as before. The passage's left side was a normal wall, fashioned with landscape paintings and the like. The right was made of fully-transparent glass, letting one observe every nook and cranny of the park.

There was the security camera on the ceiling, its light flickering as it recorded the uneventful scene.

... Next is the guard room.

I passed through the passage to the elevator hall. When I pressed the button, the light flashed to indicate a higher floor. It moved from the second floor to the first.

... Was someone up there?

The second floor was the guard room. So if I went there, would I be able to meet a security guard?

Then this is my chance. Even more so if that guard was the one to first discover the body.

When the door opened, I found a robotic space. It was an elevator. Nothing more. What was I expecting?

I stepped onto the elevator, looking at the ceiling. There, a security camera of a different model than the hallway's was fastened.

Unlike the hall's one that looked like a camera no matter how you look at it, this one was directly embedded into the ceiling, and dome-like in structure. At a single glance, you wouldn't be able to notice it was a camera.

... Did Claudia not take her hood off in the elevator because she noticed it?

No, was it just coincidence?

It's just something I have to verify with the girl in question.

I tucked it away in a corner of my mind. Though I've no idea if it'll lead to

some sort of evidence to turn the trial around. I took a photo of the elevator's security camera as well.

... I ended up taking a photo of my photo being taken.

As I thought over such a trivial thing, I felt the futility of it all.

I pressed the button for the second floor. The door automatically closed, and the elevator started moving. With a bump, the elevator rose, and arrived at the second floor.

The door opened. A step forwards, and I found myself in a dimly-lit passage. I could see spaces nearby from the light leaking out of the elevator, but further in, the darkness grew thicker, and it felt as if I had wandered into a cave.

I proceeded down the passage. A sensor on the ceiling picked up my presence, automatically starting up the fluorescent lights. An orange light lit the path.

... Quite the chic design.

Every time I took a step forward, the next sensor would activate, the lights would turn on, and my surroundings would be illuminated. Once I went away, the fluorescent lights would go out.

Light, dark, light, dark, repeat. After about ten meters of that, I finally spotted the guard room marked, 'No Unauthorized Personnel Allowed'.

I knocked the door twice, before inviting myself in.

Investigation (14) Hotel Guard Room

As I opened the guard room door, a lukewarm wind overflowed from within. Peering in, I saw a worn-sofa and a glass table. On top of it I could see drained pet bottles among recently-eaten-off-of dishes scattered about.

“W-wait, what’s all this all of a sudden!? Only authorized personnel are allowed in here!”

He had likely been lazing around to that point, looking as if he’d fall from his seat at the sudden visitor, the security guard hurriedly corrected his posture and coming ove to me.

There were numerous monitors beyond the guard, and each and every one of them displayed a monochrome scene.

There were cords extending from the monitors, connecting to an orderly line of black devices.

... Are those the recording devices for the security cameras?

As I tried taking a closer look, the guard blocked me with his body.

... Was he older than me?

There stood a guard who looked to be a little younger than thirty. There were bags under his eyes, and an unshaven stubble on his chin. An unhealthy face. I could smell a hint of sweat from his uniform, and I could tell at once that it had been a while since it was last washed.

“Um, this place is prohibited to outsiders, so please leave at once.”

“Oh? Ah, my apologies. This is the sort of person I am.”

I handed my business card to the guard making a tiresome face. No matter how quickly he wanted me to leave, that’s not how I planned to let it be. While the guard’s attention was focused on the business card, I infiltrated the guard room.

“Ah, wait, don’t just make your way in, um, lawyer?”

“That’s right. The truth is, I’m investigating the incident that happened in this hotel in November, but if it suits you, would you cooperate with my investigation?”

There was no need to be hostile to someone related to the incident. To make sure I didn’t come off antagonistic, I made a smile as I spoke.

... It seems the smile didn’t get through. The guard rubbed his sleepy-looking eyes as he didn’t take his notice off of me.

“I can’t answer anything about the incident. An official notice came from the main company not to say anything. So I can’t cooperate with you.”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. I’m not with the police so I have no authority to investigate, but I do have a right to request disclosure. Do you know about the Attorney-at-Law act?”

Without lowering his guard, the security guard’s eyes turned doubtful. “No.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate. Anyways, through the bar association, I’ve made a demand for the information pertaining to this case to be disclosed. I’ve already obtained permission. If you want, you can even verify it.”

“That’s exactly what I’ll do. Don’t do anything until I finish confirming it.”

The guard picked up a phone’s receiver and began entering the numbers. He was likely consulting with his superior.

It’s true the attorney-at-law act did have provisions for information disclosure. However, it just defined a system, and didn’t give me anything that could actually be called a right.

So the security company could decline. But there’s no way the people of the security firm would do that. In most cases, if you pushed with some force, your demands would get through.

“Yes, yes... understood.”

After some exchanges with his boss, the guard let out a sigh. His superior would have to be someone stationed higher. In contrast to his high-handed attitude towards me, he was especially humble.

Of course, from now, that humble attitude would be transferred over to me.

The only lie I told was about the about the system of requesting disclosure. Everything else was true. Before coming to the hotel, I had already contacted the security company.

But that was only about how a lawyer called Daniel would be investigating, and a request for cooperation with the case. There was no reason for a private company to decline cooperating with a lawyer, and I got the harmless and inoffensive approval for cooperation as long as it didn't touch confidential information.

Whether it was truly harmless or not was something irrelevant to the person on site. As long as the superior gave the green light, the people below could only believe and act based on it. There weren't many people who paid much mind to the extent to which they were supposed to cooperate.

There was contact from a lawyer, his search cooperation was accepted, once those two items were together, the rest was easy.

The guard put the receiver down and spoke. "Pardon my rudeness. I've just confirmed it with the main company. I shall assist with your investigation."

"No, I must apologize for calling in so late. Then to get right to it, could you tell me about the case?"

I said it as a matter of course. Without the slightest doubt, the guard answered, "I don't mind.

... It really is easy to manipulate people if you lie a bit. I thought inside, as I feigned serenity.

"Then first, about the day of the incident, um, my apologies, I've yet to hear your name."

"It's Dominic. Dominic Lloyd."

"Would you like a seat?" asked guard Lloyd as he urged me towards one, so I lowered myself into it. He sat beside me.

"Are you in the middle of today's surveillance, Mr. Lloyd?"

"Yes, that's right."

He looked terribly tired. He looked like he'd yawn for a moment, but closing

his mouth, he pushed it down his throat.

“That must be hard. Were you up all night?”

“No, I did get some sleep. But since last month, I’ve been the only one on this station.”

“You’re alone? What about the other guards?”

After asking that, I remembered... come to think of it, the victim was a security guard.

It seems Lloyd noticed my realization, as he didn’t open his mouth further. But he did spitefully mutter, “I’m the only one here right now.”

“Are there no substitute guards?”

“Everyone’s short on hands this time of year. I did put in a word to the main company, but... I doubt any assistance will be coming soon.”

He laughed with a tired expression. He sure has it rough.

“Then up to the incident, there were two guards?”

“There’s only one guard post to begin with. Right now, this hotel is closed, so it doesn’t need too strict security. Even if it’s free to enter, there isn’t anything valuable for anyone to steal.”

“But I saw an expensive-looking painting on the first floor hallway.”

“Ah, that stuff’s all fully insured. They’re imitations, so they don’t have any artistic value, and we’ll probably make more profit if someone does actually steal them.”

I nodded, “Oh, is that so,” as I thought over how shrewd the world was becoming.

“Guard work is done in shifts. We rotate between the other staff as we carry out security.”

“Is that so? Then do you know anything about the victim?”

“Nothing. I’d seen his face a few times before, but I’d never really talked with him.”

I took note of what he said. As I was writing a memo, Guard Lloyd tried to show tact as he said, “Want to see the shift table?”

“Can I?”

“Well, it’s usually not allowed, but the company did give consent. If you’re authorized, there wouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“...! ... R-right.”

I used a dry laugh to play it off. That was dangerous. I was about to say something unnecessary out of surprise.

I accepted the A4-sized sheet of copy paper. There was a shift table for October, November and December.

I looked at November’s. There was a name printed next to each day, and it seems the guards generally rotated out every three days.

Among the guard staff names were Dominic Lloyd, and the victim Hal Anderson, and...

“Um, Mr. Lloyd?”

“Yes?”

“Is this Andre McHirsh fellow also a guard?”

I pointed at the shift table. An Andre McHirsh’s name was printed on it, and Dominic leaned in to look.

“Ah, yes. That’s right. Normally, he, I and the dead victim. The plan was for the three of us to rotate shifts. But the other two suddenly went away.”

... Yes?

“Went away? Who did?”

“As I was saying, the victim and Andre. Sometime November, he contacted the main company saying he’d quit, and we haven’t been on contact since. It really is a bother; because of him I’ve been stuck on guard duty without any rest.”

Dominic Lloyd continued spilling out complaints. But his complaints were no longer entering my ears.

November. The days Andre McHirsh was originally supposed to be on duty, the 8th, 9th, and 10th.

... He was there.

I found what I was looking for. That's how I felt.

Investigation (15) Shift Table

By the guard shift table, Andre McHirsh was supposed to be on guard duty November 8th, 9th and 10th.

That aligned right with the day Claudia testified that she came to the hotel.

Claudia arrived on the hotel's roof November 10th, at nine pm. At that time, she attacked a guard.

If you put this information together logically, the victim should have been this Andre McHirsh.

But the one who was killed was Hal Anderson.

Based on the shift table, Hal Anderson was planned to work the 11th, 12th and 13th.

After that, it went Dominic Lloyd, Andre McHirsh, Hal Anderson, rotating out in that order every three days.

The prosecution claimed Claudia appeared at the hotel on November 11th, stating she killed the victim on that day.

It's true there were no contradictions there. It was logic without fault. The contradiction was born from Claudia's testimony.

Who was lying? Or was everyone telling the truth?

And Andre McHirsh. Who was he?

"Um, could I ask you something?" I posed a question to Guard Lloyd. "When exactly in November did Andre McHirsh quit the company?"

"Who knows? If I recall, I heard it was the day before the incident..."

Guard Lloyd touched his unshaven chin, answering as if he was trying to remember something.

... The day before the incident, eh?

"Then would that mean November 10th?"

“Ah, sorry, I made a mistake.”

As if trying his best to recall, Lloyd spoke slowly.

“Right, I remember. It was the 11th. The incident was reported on the 12th, and I heard from my boss he quit the day before that.”

... Because of that, I lost a day of break, he said with a tired expression.

I thought it a bit strange.

By the shift table, Hal Anderson’s shift was until the 13th. If Hal Anderson was killed the 11th as the prosecution claimed, then Lloyd would have lost two days of break, taking up work the 12th, wouldn’t he?

When I put that question to words, Lloyd said, “My boss told me, he wanted me to come starting the 13th. There were people investigating there, so it was fine, he said.”

He traced his memory as he let out his words. Because of that, his sentences were broken piece by piece.

“I don’t know the specifics, but it seems the Public Prosecutors’ Office had made a direct demand for it.”

“Prosecutor?”

Why are prosecutors coming out here? A prosecutor’s job was to charge a suspect, and lead them to judgement, wasn’t it?

It’s true that prosecutors had a right to investigate, but that was fundamentally cooperating with the police and providing assistance. It barely ever happened that a prosecutor would intervene with the scene of their own judgement.

... Unless it was an exceptionally special case, a prosecutor would use the evidence the police collected as a base to indict and get a conviction for the culprit. The ones who collected the evidence was the police. The ones who used it were the prosecutors. To the police organization that was strongly territorial, this unwritten rule was an absolute, and a basic law that shouldn’t be violated.

Just what happened. On November 12th. There was some sort of situation

that made it so they didn't want any irrelevant outsiders on the scene.

They were hiding something. But what?

The 12th was the day the report came in. There was only a silent corpse at the scene, and the incident was over.

It's true the police had an obligation to preserve the scene. But even if they had the power of the state, they couldn't put a private business completely under their control.

At most, they could make the park and viewing platform off limits. And even that was just in the time slot they were investigating, and as time passed, they'd have to release the place.

The power of the state prosecutors held was only against those who committed illegal activity, and they didn't have the slightest power against those who did not.

... This wasn't a dictatorship.

So the prosecutor intervened with the scene? Why?

How puzzling. It's getting even less comprehensible.

I spotted a door in the corner of the room and asked. "What's that?"

"Eh? Oh, that's an elevator."

"Elevator? Why do you have one in the guard room?"

"That elevator is connected to the monitoring room on the third floor."

Guard Lloyd pointed upwards. I'm sure his finger was indicating a space beyond the ceiling.

"By monitoring room, you mean the room to watch footage of the surveillance cameras?"

"That's right."

I don't really get it.

"Um, then what about the footage you're viewing here?"

"Ah, of the footage on the third floor, this is just the important places like the

entrance, and roof.”

... This hotel has over a hundred security cameras, so I can’t watch them all at once, said Guard Lloyd, his voice mingled with a sigh.

“In that case, if you go to the third floor, you can see all the footage?”

“Yes, that’s how it is. But the monitoring room is packed full of precision equipment, and there’s little space, so it’s rarely ever used.”

“Hmm, then when is it used?”

“Well let’s see. In emergencies, and when we have to collect the CDs.”

I couldn’t let those last words slide. “Wait a second.”

“The CD exchange is done on the third floor?”

“Yes, that’s right. That’s also part of a security guard’s job.”

I stood from the chair and spoke. “Um, could I go and see the third floor?”

“That’s impossible,” the guard waved his hand dismissively.

“Why’s that?”

“I mean...” Guard Lloyd pointed to his eyes as he spoke. “As long as your eye and fingerprint scans don’t match an authorized personnel, you can’t go to the third floor.”

... As long as that biometric authentication system is in place, no one can go to the third floor, said Lloyd.

Investigation (16) Three Keys

“Biometric authentication system?”

I asked. There, Guard Lloyd lifted up three of his fingers. “In order to go to the third floor, you have to clear three conditions.”

“Three, is it? That’s quite a bit.”

“Of course it is. The security camera footage clearly captures the private lives of our guests. We have to avoid that info from leaking by all means.”

The guard gave a dry laugh. Of course, because of his built-up fatigue, there was a hint of lament lingering in it.

“So what are these three keys, specifically?”

After thinking a moment, Guard Lloyd muttered, “Well, it’s nothing secret, so I guess it’s alright.”

“The three keys are fingerprint, eye and weight.”

I wrote them down. And I asked. “What do you mean by eye?”

“Who knows? I don’t know the specifics, but it seems every person has a different characteristic eye.”

... So it’s like DNA, I muttered in my heart.

“What they scan is the pattern of your iris, apparently. After around a year from their birth, the pattern of a human iris will barely change for the rest of their life. That’s why it’s used in biometrics, or so my boss told me before.”

“Hmm, so they have something like that these days.”

“Yes, when you think of biometrics, the orthodox is to look at DNA strands, but who’d be able to bear having to spit or have blood drawn every time they need to scan? In that regard, iris recognition can identify people at once as long as you have the right equipment, so it’s the easy way.”

Impressed at how far science had gotten in places I wasn’t looking, I posed a question.

“If biometrics is the issue at hand, then there’ll be a problem with twins, right? Are these systems fine with twins as well?”

“Yeah, I’m just handing down whatever my boss told me here, but,” Lloyd thought hard as he spoke. “a human’s iris changes by external influence. Since even people born the same will have differences in experience, it should be able to tell the differences between twins as well.”

... Though I can’t say for sure if that’s true or not, he added on.

Then we can’t use the twins trick, I thought to myself.

“Even with fingerprints, the probability twins will match is exceedingly low, and the iris pattern can change after birth. Even if they have the same faces, there are idiosyncrasies in their eyes. As they say, the eyes speak more than the mouth.”

It seems Guard Lloyd thought he had said something clever, but it wasn’t the slightest bit funny to me.

... My troublesome problems had increased. Like this, trickery would be impossible, would it not?

“Okay, I get the fingerprint and iris scans. As long as they’re in place, it doesn’t look like any outsider is going to the third floor.”

... But I added on.

“What about weight?”

“Ah, that means only one person can ride the elevator at once. It’s been calibrated beforehand, and if you exceed plus or minus three kilograms of your recorded body weight, the elevator won’t move.”

... So it’s one person per ride.

“Then once someone’s gone up to the third floor, a second can follow him up?”

It’s quite a pain, but it would allow more than two people to go to the third floor.

But the guard shook his head to the side. “That’s impossible.

“Once the elevator’s gone up once, unless someone is sensed inside of it and presses the button, it won’t go down. It doesn’t automatically descend to this floor. You can’t be too heavy, and you can’t be too light.”

“Um, meaning when the elevator is on the third floor, even if a person on the second floor pushes the button, until the person up there rides back down, the elevator won’t come to the second floor?”

Guard Lloyd nodded. “Exactly. Quite a pain, right?”

“And only security guards can ride it? Is that how it’s set?”

“That’s right. And every time the shift changes, the biometric data changes, so if you don’t finish work within your timeslot, it’s quite a pain when it locks you out.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Um, well look, if I’m on duty for day one...”

Lloyd pointed at the first day on the shift table. Pointing the day two, he went on.

“And day two’s someone else, let’s say Mr. A. On day one, since it’s my shift, my fingerprint, iris, and weight will allow me to go up. But once it gets to day two, the shift changes, so to ride the elevator, you’ll need Mr. A’s fingerprint and iris. Also his weight.”

... With each change in shift, the people who could ride the elevator changed.

Something similar had become a problem in the trial right? As I recall, it was the timing of the CD recordings. They were set to be preserved on a new CD every time the date changed.

... They were being real thorough here. How should I put it, it’s as if this security company doesn’t trust people at all.

I guess that goes without saying. They’re a guard company, so doubting people is their job.

I wrote memos until I was out of white space, and got the information together.

The security company's biometric scanning didn't come up at the trial. This was information more vital than I thought. I mean...

No, not just more than I thought, this was a problem related to the basis of this case.

I had asserted it in court. These security camera reels had been conceived by someone or another

There was a high chance the 10th's footage had been swapped out with the 11th's. That's definitely what I claimed.

But what's with this situation?

Isn't that impossible? No one would have been able to swap them.

In order to actualize that trick with the disks, you'd have to obtain the 10th, 11th, and 12th's CDs before they were filed away.

As the report came to the police on the 12th, first off, it would be impossible to swap them out after that.

No, in the first place, in order to swap out the 12th's CD with another one, you'd have to wait until the 12th's footage was completely recorded. That would be fully recorded on the 13th, at 0:00, so until that time, should I think the CD wasn't swapped out until that point?

On the 13th, at 0:00. The only one who could use the guard room elevator at that time was... Hal Anderson?

... Only the victim would have been able to change out the disks.

"That can't be."

To think I'd be overturning my claims myself... this is the worst possible development.

Investigation (17) From the Black Forest

... This is bad. This is really bad.

This new truth was disadvantageous to my side no matter how you looked at it. But if I had one question, it would be why this fact hadn't come out up to now.

With the guard room's security, no one would have been able to alter the CDs. But why didn't Cate make that claim in last time's trial?

The prosecution had hold of this fact. They went out of their way to interfere in the security firm's dealings, so there was no doubt about it.

I tried putting the trial's flow in order. And I found one contradiction.

... No, that's strange. This truth, and the trial's record faced a logical discrepancy.

Putting Claudia's testimony to the side for now, the victim Hal Anderson was found in the park on the 12th. There was a part of his corpse, so let's just say there's no doubt about it for now...

There was only one guard stationed in the security room. That one guard was killed. Then who in blazes made the report at 6:00 am on the 12th?

November. All the hotel staff-excluding the manager-were on holiday.

Was it the manager? Did that man with the throaty voice report it to the police?

The district police definitely received the report at six. What was the hotel manager doing in the park at such an early timeframe?

"If I may ask..." I spoke to Guard Lloyd. "Where is the manager of this hotel?"

"The manager isn't here," said he as if it were only natural. "Right now, that person is inspecting the new resort hotel he plans on opening next year."

"Eh? But when I called yesterday, I got through to him on the phone."

"When the hotel's off business, all calls to the hotel are forwarded to the

manager's cell. Even if he isn't here, you can reach him on the phone."

What's that supposed to mean?

"In that case, there's no one in this hotel?"

"That's not true. When noon comes around, the basement restaurant, souvenir shop and sports gym are open. Well, the hotel's closed, so they barely get any customers though."

... From noon?

"Are those people at this hotel around six in the morning?"

"No way. They don't come that early."

Lloyd refuted it with a dry laugh. "They're actually supposed to come at ten, but the manager isn't here. They calmly come in late at twelve."

So even if you go down to the basement now, you won't be able to buy anything, he added on.

That's strange. On the 12th, the police came to the hotel because of a report of a body.

I had thought the report came in from a guard, or an employee of the hotel, but with this hotel's situation, neither of them fit.

Who made the report?

... Good grief, what's going on? My head's starting to spin.

As I was thinking to myself, I felt a tremor from my bag.

"... Ah, pardon me."

I took the satellite phone out of my bag, and walked out of the room. The hall that had been pitch black to that point sensed me the moment I leapt into it, the red fluorescent lights illuminating the path.

I answered the phone, and the moment I put it to my hear...

'H... h-h-h-h-heeeeeellp!!'

I heard Jessica Belliqueuse's high-pitched voice.

Investigation (18) From the Black Forest

‘Mr. Daniel, help, I’m in biig troooubblee!!’

She was so loud I took my ear from the phone. All the while, she kept up on some incomprehensible screams, but they probably had no meaning to begin with.

‘Waaah, please save me!! The monsters, the monsters are too stroonng!’

“Oy, hello, Mrs. Jessica, are you there?”

I turned down the volume, setting it at a level that didn’t damage my ears. “Can you hear me now?”

‘Wait, Mr. Daniel, why do you sound so care-free!? I’m in big trouble right now!’

Besides her voice, I could hear the heavy sound of panting, and the swift beat of footsteps. It’s quite likely that at this moment, Jessica was running for her life.

“Oy, oy, what happened? You sound as if you were attacked by a monster.”

“I don’t just sound it! What’s with this thing? It’s skin is ridiculously hard! Gyah! Fire, Mr. Daniel, it’s breathing fire!”

“Calm down, you’re not making any sense.

I lifted up my bag, and walked towards the elevator hall.

‘W-what do you mean by calm down!? In the first place, this is different from what we talked about! I never heard they’d be this strong!’

Jessica swiftly unraveled her mouth, and raised an incomprehensible scream of ‘Upyaaah!!’

“Eh? What’s that? What’s upyaaah supposed to mean?”

‘Why is that the part you react to!? You’re definitely doing this on purpose, you’re evading the question on purpose!’

... Tsk. She’s surprisingly sharp.

“Hahaha, there’s no way I am. I mean look, you’re strong enough to beat a dragon, so I thought monsters of that level would be nothing. Hahaha, looks like my plans have gone awry.”

‘Terrible! You’re terrible! There was a three headed wolf just now!’

“Eh? You met Cerberus? That’s amazing, I thought he was just a monster of legend.”

‘It’s not amazing at all!’

Jessica tried to say something again, but after raising another cry of, ‘Myaaaah!’ she suddenly went silent.

“Huh, oy, get a grip, hello?”

I tried calling out a few times, but there was no response. Just the cracking sound of something breaking, alongside the roar of some beast-like thing. It seems the phone survived.

Of course, I hadn’t the slightest clue towards the state of its owner.

... Did she die?

That’s bad. If that’s how it was going to be, I shouldn’t have sent her that fifty thousand, I thought, when, ‘I’m still alive!’ I heard Jessica’s voice.

‘That was dangerous. That one was really dangerous!! Mr. Daniel! This is impossible! I-I’m going home!!’

“Hey, wait a minute. Did you take the all-important pictures?”

‘There’s no way I did!!’

It seems she was really angry.

‘When I don’t know left from right, I don’t even know where I am right now, there’s no way I could find that godforsaken house of yours!’

“Eh? Wait? Could it be you’re lost?”

‘Eh?’

“What’s that Eh mean?”

‘Wah.’

... What is it this time.

‘W-waaaaaaaaaaaaah!! I can’t go hommmme!!’

“Oy, calm down. If you make too much noise, you’ll attract something,”

‘Shut your mouth, amateur! I’ve had enough’

... I can’t go on! Jessica cried out. And a cry of ‘Nooooooo!’ flooded out of the speaker.

It seems Jessica was running. At full speed. Perhaps something was chasing her. At times, I could hear her cries of, ‘Don’t come this way!’

Just how much time had passed? Jessica’s incessant cries suddenly came to a complete stop, and I couldn’t hear anything anymore.

“Hello? Oy, what happened? Can you hear me?”

‘Heeeh, where am I now?’

... It hurts, I could hear her displeased voice. For now, it seems she was still safe.

‘Mr. Daniel. If I recall, you said the house was next to a river, right?’

Did she hit her head? Her cluttered manner up to now had completely changed, and while choked with tears, her tone was calming down.

“Yes, the house the client lives in is apparently next to a river.”

‘But there’s no river next to this house.’

“Huh? What are you saying?”

‘I’m telling you, there’s no river anywhere near this house.’

... This house?

“Jessica, could it be that right now, there’s a house next to you?”

‘There is.’ She complained. ‘Why is there a house in a place like this? I almost ran into it.’

... There really is a house?

To be honest, I was half in doubt. If that’s how it was going to be, I should’ve

given her a video phone.

For now, let's believe Jessica.

"Can you take a photo of that house?"

'Are you sure this house is the right one?'

I heard the rustling of her taking something out. Eventually, 'Thank god, it didn't break,' I heard a cheerful voice.

'Then I'm taking the photo.'

"Yeah, I leave it to you. While you're at it, investigate what's inside the house as well."

'Okay, got it.'

"By the way," there was something bothering me. "Are there any monsters in the area?"

'Eh? Oh, you're right. There were loads of monsters trying to eat me, but what happened to them?'

... I don't know something like that.

If there are no monsters, then all the better. "Isn't that good? That there aren't any monsters?"

I said, as I felt I had forgotten something.

... What is it? It's like I'm overlooking...

Right, it was in the visiting room. Claudia asked...

'Are you scared of them? Monsters?'

She definitely said that.

Claudia had never been attacked by monsters in the Dark Forest. That was because the monsters feared her...

Then why wasn't anything attacking Jessica right now?

There was no reason for the monsters to fear Jessica. And in all actuality, she had been attacked all the way there. Let alone fear, they should be thinking of her as nothing but delicious.

... Then there has to be something else. Something else the monsters of the black forest fear must be right next to Jessica.

Is it the house?

“Oy, wait a second.”

‘Eh? What is it?’

“Don’t go into the house just yet.”

‘Even if you tell me that, I already went in.’

... Click. The call cut off.

Investigation (19) From the Black Forest

“Oy, Jessica? What happened?”

I tried calling a few times into the phone before noticing my own foolishness.

... When the line was cut, there’s no way she could hear me.

I dialed in the number, and called her again. But the call tone resounded in vain, without the slightest response.

... Did something happen.

I stood in the elevator hall, and pushed the button. Eventually, the door opened, and I pushed the button to go to the top floor.

The door closed, and after a bump, the elevator went on its way up. Along the way, I tried calling her a few more times, but no one picked up.

The door to the top floor opened up, I went outside. It was a dark hall, with nothing but a green emergency light at the end as its sole source of light.

There was white lettering on the emergency light, indicating that there were, ‘Emergency Stairs’ below it.

... So there are stairs too.

As I held the satellite phone in thought, its speaker suddenly let out an intense cry of, ‘Mr. Daniel, why did you suddenly hang up on me!?’ from Jessica.

I left the hall, and went outside. It was a roof with good weather expanding around it, with little interference for the electromagnetic waves.

“Oh, it finally got through. Don’t be so impatient.”

‘That’s my line. Why did you hand up?’

... sob, I could hear a small weeping voice.

“Ah? What are you talking about? Aren’t you the one who hung up? In the first place, after I called you so many times, you just ignored me.”

‘Vwaht? What are *you* talking about? I was redialing you the whole time.

You're the one who never picked up!'

... The story isn't meshing. Was the signal thrown off? And what's Vwaht?

"I got it, calm down for a second."

'Please don't leave me alone again...'

"I'm sorry."

... Why am I apologizing?

I placed my bag on the ground, sitting myself against a wall.

Looking up at the sky, I found it fresh and blue. It seems I had been talking with that guard quite a long time. The weather had cleared up before I noticed it. The outside December air still coldly stung into my skin. But the light of the sun was more comfortable than anything.

"And so? Did you take the pictures?"

'Ah, um... that's... the truth is...'

Jessica had great trouble saying it, as she evaded the question.

"What happened?"

'Urk, um, I'm sorry. The camera broke.'

"Hah?"

... For real?

'Um, until I came here, it was working just fine. I took a number of test shots, so there's no doubt about it.'

"Hmm, I see. So did they come out well?"

'Yes, I came out cute every time!'

... She tested through selfie.

'But the moment I tried taking a photo inside the house, the camera suddenly let off smoke, and the film burned up.'

... It really surprised me, or so Jessica's voice without any sense of crisis unnecessarily irritated me.

“Then why not switch out one of the spare films?”

‘I don’t have any more.’

“Why don’t you, I gave you loads of them!”

‘I already used them up.’

... No more, please.

‘Ah, but, but it’s fine. The digital camera is still properly functional!’

“... Really?”

‘Oh, I hear your doubt! You’re terrible, how about you trust me a bit!’

As if I could! I thought, as I grew sick of this situation where there was no option but to trust her.

“Got it, understood. I’ll believe it. So what’s it like in the house?”

‘Well you see, Mr. Daniel. It’s really dirty!’ Jessica spoke in a strangely enthusiastic tone. ‘The inside’s all muddled, and covered in dust, and there are spider webs everywhere. I’d never be able to live there!’

From what I could hear, that was surely an uninhabited house.

Claudia received the letter and entered Grimbeld just the other month. I couldn’t think it would get that bad in just a month or two.

... No, under that cute face, perhaps she was actually a slob.

“Jessica,” I called across the satellite phone. “Do you think anyone could live there?”

‘Impossible, not happening, definitely not. There’s so much dust, you’d suffocate if you tried living here!’

Meaning irrelevant to whether Claudia could clean up or not, this house didn’t seem to be hers.

... Is it irrelevant to the case?

I couldn’t tell.

“Are you in the house right now?”

When I asked, I got the response of, 'No, I'm out right now.'

'I don't want to stay another second in there. It burns cameras, the spider webs catch on my face, it stings my eyes, and it's simply awful. On top of that, you don't answer the phone.'

... Hmph... she let off a threatening voice. Even if I wasn't looking directly at her, I could easily imagine the sullen look on her face.

"You're still on about that? How persistent. Isn't it fine? It connected eventually."

'Ah, you're terrible. Do you know just how much terror I had to suppress walking through that house!?'

"Yeah, yeah, got it."

'I was ridiculously lonely until I got out. Please answer the phone quicker!'

"And I'm saying..."

... Until you got out?

"Hey, the phone connected after you got out?"

'That's right. What of it?'

... The phone line cut off because she entered the house.

It's true, with signal jammers, you could interfere with a cell phone's reception.

But would such a cutting-edge technology be placed in such a remote, savage land? More than that, a place without electricity, water, or gas?

It's not like there were no ways to block a cellphone signal in a place without any existing infrastructure.

... If you used magic, it wasn't impossible.

Among the magicians, there are some skilled in magic to jam signals, apparently. There were many magic tools on the market that could easily interfere with weak signals.

Of course, interfering with a high-output signal would require an adequate

amount of magic.

Though if it were only on the level of cell reception, it should be able to do it without too much of a hassle. But if it's blocking the high output of a satellite phone, that should mean it would take a relatively powerful magic.

Who had done such a thing? Did that old dilapidated house really hold something they didn't want anyone to know that badly?

My interest was suddenly welling up.

"Jessica."

'What is it?'

"Conduct a thorough examination."

On my words, Jessica let out an unpleasant sound, but in the end, she gave a reluctant, 'understood.'

Investigation (20) Viewing Platform

Hanging up the phone, and putting it away in my bag, I was hit by a wave of fatigue. I let out a sigh.

When I closed my eyes, my sight went dark, and it felt as if there was no one in the world at that moment but me.

I took a moment of rest alone. A cold wind blew across the roof.

... This was the last spurt. I'll try a bit harder.

Opening my eyes, I looked up. There was a single security camera fastened to the wall, taking in the surrounding scenery.

The security camera's lens was focused on the viewing platform, and looking in that direction, there truly was a familiar scene.

It was the exact scene from the footage. If I had to state the difference, it was only that when I last saw it, it was monochrome, and this time it was in full color.

There was a set of binoculars with a toll, and if you paid 200G, you could see far-off scenes for a minute and no more.

There was a black parapet beyond the binoculars, but nothing beyond that. I leaned on the handrail to see far away.

... It really was a picturesque view.

A strong wind blew from the front, but even so, I couldn't take my eyes off the scenery. The viewing platform that let you look over the entire mountain range surrounding the country was worthy of being a tourist attraction.

How much time had passed? My spine shuddered at the cold wind, as I lowered my field of vision. I noticed.

There was barely any space beyond the viewing platform's handrail. Once you surpassed it, you'd instantly fall right off the roof.

It was hard to see from so high, but right below the platform was the park

from before.

... Once he fell from here, the victim hit that statue, his arm was cut off.

Based on what I could see on the surveillance camera, I thought that was correct.

But when I looked at the park from the platform like this, I couldn't help but wonder.

... Isn't it a bit far?

I hadn't done the calculations, so I can't tell, but in most cases, where a person fell from the sky, they'd fall straight to the ground.

Of course, if they had some starting forward velocity, their fall would shift proportionally to that vector.

The security camera footage had no such scene. He just fell over the parapet, and without any running start, fell straight down.

If he fell like that, wouldn't he have fallen before the statue, a little closer to the hotel?

And there were other questionable points. The floor right below this one had a veranda, and while it was only by about 50cm, it did just out.

... In the case he fell straight from the viewing platform, wouldn't he have fallen to the veranda right below?

I've no basis. No evidence. But once that supposition passed through my mind for a moment, it wouldn't go away. More than that, it started looking like the truth.

The roof was the thirteenth floor, so below should be the 12th.

The height was around two and a half meters. I'm sure it would hurt, but it probably wasn't enough to kill.

Right. Falling to the 12th floor wouldn't kill someone. And the body wouldn't have been found in the park.

I felt I was getting somewhere. Right, what if...

When Claudia attacked Hal Anderson on the 10th, the victim cut across the

back didn't accidentally fall over the handrail... he was trying to flee from the roof to the 12th floor?

If those thoughts are true, then Claudia wouldn't be the culprit. Well, she wouldn't be able to avoid the crime of inflicting bodily harm, but she wouldn't get first-degree murder.

And on the 11th, at 21:30... someone else attacked Hal Anderson, who was hiding on the 12th floor, and pushed him off of the viewing platform. If he fell from a place further out than the roof-the jutting veranda for example-it wouldn't be strange if he hit the statue, losing his arm.

I don't know why there was a space of a day. I don't, but by this logic, I could resolve the contradiction in the footage.

"Haha," for some reason, a laugh leaked from my mouth. "I solved it. That's right. If that's how it is, it all works out."

The existence of the third party, the contradiction of the security camera, the discrepancies in testimony, all of it could be logically explained.

There was only one mystery that remained. How did they alter the surveillance camera footage?

As long as I could solve that mystery, defending Claudia would be easy.

I felt as if I'd finally found a light in the darkness.

As my heart danced at this new truth, the sound of cell phone rang out.

As it wasn't the satellite phone, but my normal phone, it was clearly not Jessica. Wondering who it was, I looked at the number and found it was from the district court. I picked up at once. "Hello?"

'Is this the correct contact information for Daniel Lockhart the defense attorney?'

It was a business-like tone. I responded, 'Yes, you've reached Daniel.'

'The date for the second hearing has been decided. December 11th, in the district court. Please be there by 12:00.'

After briefly giving the main points alone, the line was cut. Without another

word, I put the cellphone away in my breast pocket.

Today was December 9th. I still didn't have all the evidence I needed to prove Claudia was innocent.